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Book Review: Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy by Stephen Wertheim

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Wertheim, Stephen. *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. 262 pages. Hardcover, $29.95.

Wertheim is a Research Scholar at Columbia University's Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, and deputy director at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, and a frequent contributor to *Foreign Affairs*. This book examines in great detail some of the internal discussions among the U.S. political elites as they envisioned America's role in the pivotal years of the late 1930s through the end of World War II. The story of America's rise to prominence in the post-war era is widely known but Wertheim makes a valuable addition by delving into the thinking of American elites on the outside of government (such as Henry Luce and Walter Lippmann) as well as those working within the State Department and other Executive Branch agencies.

There are three major themes in the book. The first is that the well-known debate between internationalists and isolationists in the run-up to World War II was a false debate concocted by American elites who advocated intervening in the wars then underway. They used the term isolationist to refer to anyone who argued that the U.S. could provide for its security and prosperity without necessarily intervening in either Europe or Asia. The claim is very well supported by direct quotation from speeches and documents.

The second major theme is that attitudes toward the debate about intervention evolved as events unfolded in Europe (Asia was not a primary concern of American elites in this account). First the concern was how secure and prosperous could the U.S. be in a world ruled by Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia. Once it became apparent that Germany was stymied by the English Channel and then by the Russian winter, the Americans began contemplating a world in which Germany was *not* the pre-eminent power in Europe, and would be massively weaker than the U.S. Then, the solution seemed to come into an informal alliance with the U.K. to make use of its power

and colonies to provide some order in the world. Before long the alliance of partners became one with the U.S. the leading power.

The third major theme is that for much of the war, American elites were not imagining what we know as the United Nations, but rather a condominium of cooperation between the two English-speaking allies. Wertheim argues that American planners eventually moved to the universal membership U.N. model to accommodate the Soviet Union (who would be understandably upset by being outside of the Anglo-American alliance). Moreover, he argues, the new organization would provide cover for the American military supremacy that was going to be the power that enforced the international agreements after the war. Partly as a result of this, the debate about joining the United Nations had none of the fireworks of the earlier League of Nations debate.

The greatest contribution this very well-researched book makes is to open up the black box and allow readers to see how a concerted effort by foreign policy elites within and outside of government guided the U.S. from its standard Western Hemispheric posture, to the world's preeminent power and shaper of international institutions. Time and again, Wertheim suggests that those who explain U.S. behavior solely by changing events in the outside world, miss at least half the picture. Yes, foreign developments surely affected the visions and calculations as the post-war discussions were underway. But knowing that those unofficial discussions occurred while official government officials were occupied with fighting the war and maintaining the wartime alliances, expands our understanding of the post-war developments. Wertheim succeeds in explaining how the activities of non-governmental elites (in the Council on Foreign Relations; *Life* magazine; *Foreign Policy* journal, et al.) moved the U.S. into a position that prevented the country from returning to the Western Hemisphere, or bowing, once again, to the wisdom of the U.K.

One weakness in this analysis is the paucity of attention devoted to either Japan or the U.S.S.R. The planners were overwhelmingly Eurocentric and perhaps did not perceive the Soviet Union as particularly European, though that changed once Germany invaded the U.S.S.R. Wertheim claims that the limited attention was a reflection of the myopic thinking of the time, but the analysis feels unbalanced or incomplete as a consequence.

This book makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of this most critical period in American foreign policy history. Less attention was given to the ways fascism was defeated and more given to how the era gave birth to a combined realist-liberal world. It is not hyperbole to say that we can see clearly the shadows of that period in today's world. Most Americans, elite and public, have not questioned whether the U.S. should maintain military bases around the world, and take responsibility for ensuring order internationally. When things go bad as in Vietnam, Americans reassess the role as the world's policeman, but only someone like President Trump could bring into question our commitment to the liberal international order, as well as its realist counterpart N.A.T.O. This book encourages us to consider the American global role anew.

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